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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000157

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON CHIEF ADVISER

REF: A. STATE 04128

[1](#)B. DHAKA 083

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 b

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Chief Adviser Ahmed smoothly made the government's case for far-reaching reforms as a prelude to "free, fair, and credible elections." He acknowledged some "excesses" during the government's mass detentions, but urged the U.S. to focus instead on the instant corrective action the government took as a result. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On January 29, the Ambassador and polchief (note taker) called on government Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. Acting Foreign Secretary Touhid Hussain and two government press officers sat in.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Ahmed expressed appreciation for decades of U.S.-Bangladeshi partnership, noting the U.S. has been a key development partner of Bangladesh since 1971, that it is Bangladesh's largest bilateral trading partner, and that it remains the top choice for Bangladeshi students.

[1](#)4. (C) The Ambassador stated the USG continues to support the government and people of Bangladesh. The international community had not sought or supported a state of emergency; instead, its focus had been to press the political parties to produce a successful election. The new government enjoys broad support, but people expect it to create conditions for successful elections as soon as possible. Its ambitious reform agenda, she continued, is also popular, though some of it, like economic development, might be better suited to an elected administration. She encouraged the government to reach out to the political parties to include them in the reform process.

[1](#)5. (C) There was "no alternative" to the January 11 change of governments, Ahmed said. He described the government's primary goal as elections as soon as possible, but they must be "free, fair, and credible" (a mantra he repeated several times). The people don't want an election that simply reverts to politics as usual, he said. Another priority is economic growth because without it, political reform cannot prosper. "We're a caretaker government, but we're trying to move forward within the constitution. We're faced with a difficult situation concerning elections because we need good governance to support the economy and a good economy to support the election."

[1](#)6. (C) On the election itself, Ahmed said, the government wants "good, qualified, and honest" candidates, to "reduce" illicit political money and thuggery, and to ensure security for campaigning and polling day. Once the Election Commission is reconstituted, the government will work with it on these points. Asked when a new chief election

commissioner might be named, Ahmed pointed to the end of this week. "If you support us, we will deliver the election people want," he added. He assured the Ambassador that the government will not stay in office "one day longer" than necessary to hold good elections.

17. (C) Reiterating ref a demarche points originally conveyed to Ahmed via letter (ref B), the Ambassador stressed USG concerns about the government's broad emergency powers, the constraints on press freedom, the need to respect due process and end custodial deaths, and our hope that the emergency powers could be rolled back soon to facilitate transparent, accountable, and peaceful politicking and other lawful activities.

18. (C) "There may have been some excesses," Ahmed acknowledged, "but look at what we do in response." As an example, he said when he saw in a local paper a picture of a detainee suspended from a ceiling fan in a police station, he called the Home Secretary to demand action, which led to the instant suspension of the involved police officials and the start of an investigation. He asserted support for a free press, but in an emergency period it is important for the press to "support" government actions.

19. (C) Ahmed agreed it was vital to reach out to the political parties because they retain large constituencies, but an even bigger constituency, he argued, is the ordinary people who are counting on the government to seize this opportunity to bolster democracy through improved governance. Feedback to government advisers traveling throughout the country has been outstanding, he said.

110. (C) The Ambassador closed by informing Ahmed that she

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would be leaving Bangladesh later this year to accept a senior position at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. She stressed that her departure did not signal any change in U.S. policy and did not reflect on any recent events; rather, when she had first been approached on this position last fall, her expectation was she would leave well after the election and the induction of a new government. Ahmed expressed regret the Ambassador would be leaving after a relatively brief tenure and wished her well in her new assignment.

111. (C) Comment: The chief adviser was smooth and business-like in making the government's case for far reaching reforms. During the 45-minute meeting, there was not even an indirect reference to the military role in his government's creation and operation.
BUTENIS